

# Rules of the Game

## Using Magic Items (Part One)

By Skip Williams



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From the player's or DM's point of view, a magic item is an object that provides the user with some paranormal ability that is stored or channeled within the object itself. Nothing puts a sparkle in a player's eye quite like a magic item. It represents power in the game world and serves as a badge of success among other players. Most of us just can't get enough magic items. Unfortunately, a magic item that looks cool on a character sheet can cause trouble in play, especially when the DM and the player can't quite agree on exactly how the thing works, as is often the case when the course of an adventure hangs in the balance.

This article focuses on magic items and how they work. For an overview of the rules that govern magic in the **D&D** game, check out Chapter 10 in the *Player's Handbook*. Also see The Rules of the Game: [Reading Spell Descriptions](#).

### Some Key Terms

Here are a few terms you'll encounter in this article and in the rules when they discuss magic items.

**Activation:** To make use of a magic item's powers, you must activate the item. In most cases, activating an item requires the activate magic item action, which is a standard action (see pages 138 and 139 in the *Player's Handbook* for more on standard actions) that does not provoke an attack of opportunity.

All magic items in the core **D&D** game use one of four activation methods: Spell completion, spell trigger, command word, and use-activated. All of these are discussed on page 213 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and in Part Two.

**Aura:** Most magic items have magical auras that *detect magic* spells can reveal. The power and school of an item's aura is shown in the item's description. See the *detect magic* spell description for details.

**Caster Level:** Every magic item has a caster level, which the item's description shows. An item's caster level determines the item's own saving throw bonuses when the item must make a saving throw. If an item can produce a spell effect, its caster level determines any level-based variables the spell effect might have (such as range and damage). An item's caster level also determines how susceptible the item or the spell effects it produces are to *dispel magic* effects.

**Charge:** A discrete unit of an item's power that is used up when someone activates the item. For example, a newly created wand has 50 charges. An item becomes nonmagical when all its charges are used up.

In general, a charged item cannot be recharged.

**Item Slot:** A specific part of the user's body where an item must be worn before it can function. Sometimes it is

simply called a slot.

**Market Price:** The cost, in gold pieces, that an item brings on the open market. Sometimes this is simply called price. An item's market price is a retail price (or the price a character must pay when buying the item). Characters who sell used items can expect to get only half the market price.

## Kinds of Magic Items

The **D&D** game divides magic items into nine broad categories, which are described in Chapter 7 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Individual magic item descriptions tend to be very brief, and many details that determine how an item works in play are contained in the notes for the item's category. Here's an overview:

**Armor and Shields:** These protective magic items work just like their nonmagical counterparts (see Chapter 7 in the *Player's Handbook*). That is, a magic heavy shield works pretty much just like a nonmagical heavy shield in addition to any magical properties it has.

Though the rules don't come right out and say so, you must wear magic armor to use any of its abilities. Likewise, you must pick up a magic shield and either hold it in your hand or strap it to your arm (or what passes for an arm if you're not humanoid), or both as appropriate for the kind the shield, to get any benefit from the shield.

Most purely defensive properties that a set of magic armor or a magic shield has (such as enhancement bonus to Armor Class, resistance to energy, or the like) work continuously once you don the armor or have the shield ready on your arm. Most other special abilities (such as attacking foes or magical travel) require you to both wear the armor (or properly wield the shield) and speak a command word.

All magic armor and shields are masterwork items, and any armor check penalties they impose on you are reduced by one point, to a minimum of 0. (Just in case you're wondering, arcane spell failure chances aren't reduced unless the item description specifically says so or the item is made from a special material that reduces them, such as mithral.)

Prices given for armor assumes armor made for Medium humanoids. Armor for most other creatures entails an additional cost, as noted on pages 123 in the *Player's Handbook*. When armor is made for an unusual creature, subtract the armor cost for a Medium humanoid and then add the armor cost for the unusual creature.

For example, a suit of *+1 half-plate armor* usually costs 1,750 gp, which includes 1,000 gp for the +1 enhancement, 600 gp for a suit of half-plate armor, and 150 gp for masterwork armor. A suit of *+1 half-plate barding* for a war horse would cost 3,550 gp, which includes 1,000 gp for the +1 enhancement, 2,400 gp for a suit of half-plate armor for a large nonhumanoid wearer, and 150 gp for masterwork armor.

**Weapons:** Like magic armor and shields, magic weapons function just like normal weapons, and they're masterwork items, too. Even if a magic weapon's magical properties are suppressed (as they would be in an *antimagic field*), the weapon still provides a +1 enhancement bonus on attack rolls thanks to its masterwork quality.

The rules don't say so, but you must hold a magic weapon in one or two hands (as appropriate for the weapon) to use any of its magical properties. You cannot, for example, use a sword's spell-like abilities while you have the

sword put away in its scabbard.

You get any enhancement bonus on attack rolls that the weapon provides simply by attacking with the weapon. Most other powers, however, require you to hold the weapon and speak a command word.

Most magic ranged weapons that use ammunition impart some of their magical properties to ammunition fired from them. The ranged weapon's enhancement bonus on attack and damage rolls applies to the ranged attack, even if the ammunition isn't magical, and the ammunition overcomes damage reduction just as if it were a magic weapon itself. If both the ammunition and the weapon have enhancement bonuses, however, they do not stack under the **D&D 3.5** rules (they did stack in **D&D 3.0**), only the highest enhancement bonus applies. If the weapon has an alignment, it imparts that alignment to the ammunition, and the ammunition overcomes damage reduction accordingly. If the ammunition already has an alignment, it has both its own alignment and the weapon's alignment when fired, even if those two alignments are opposed to each other. (The *Dungeon Master's Guide* uses the example of anarchic ammunition fired from an axiomatic weapon, making the ammunition both lawful and chaotic when fired; see page 221.)

When a ranged weapon has another magical property that can affect things the weapon hits in combat, the weapon might also impart that property to ammunition fired from it; see the descriptions for the various weapon powers on pages 223-226. For example, a *flaming* bow imparts the *flaming* property to arrows fired from it.

If the ammunition already has one or more magical properties, add the weapon's properties to the ammunition's properties. DMs can, and probably should, place some limits on what properties ammunition can receive. For example, it probably wouldn't do for ammunition to receive the same property twice; that is, you'd get no extra effect from firing arrows with the *flaming* property from a bow with the *flaming* property.

Like armor, weapon costs assume a Medium wielder; adjust the cost for bigger or smaller wielders as noted for armor.

**Potions and Oils:** These items are essentially precast spells in liquid form. You trigger the spell by drinking the potion or smearing on the oil; this is a standard action that provokes attacks of opportunity.

If an attack hits you while you're drinking a potion or applying an oil, you must make a Concentration check. The check DC is 10 + the damage dealt. The rules say that you make the check exactly as if you were casting a spell, which would make the check DC 10 + spell level + the damage dealt; however, you aren't really casting a spell when you're drinking a potion or applying an oil, so the spell level isn't relevant. Using a potion or oil on yourself is always a standard action, no matter what casting time the stored spell normally requires (see Part Two)

If you fail a Concentration check while drinking a potion or applying an oil, you can't use the potion or oil, but the item isn't wasted. Your foes, however, can direct their attacks (even attacks of opportunity) at the vial containing the potion or oil and could break the container and effectively destroy the potion or oil.

**Rings:** To use a ring, you must wear it on your hand (or on what passes for a hand). Most rings are activated with a command word, but some work continuously once you put them on, and some work automatically whenever you do something that the ring affects. In general, when a ring produces a spell effect, you must use a command word to activate it. Rings that give you some kind of bonus (such as a skill bonus or an Armor Class bonus) work continuously or work automatically when you need them. Rings with defensive abilities usually work continuously, and rings that allow some kind of attack (such as shooting stars or ramming) require a command word. In most cases, the ring's description will at least give you a hint about how the ring is activated -- look for

words and phrases such as "on command," "continuously," or "as a free action." Note that even when you can activate an item as a free action, you usually can do so only during your turn. Beware of rings that produce spell effects with unusual casting times, however. For example, a *ring offeather falling* requires a free action to activate because you cast the spell as a free action. You also can activate the ring when it's not your turn, just as you can cast the spell when it isn't your turn.

Rings generally fit any corporeal creature, regardless of the creature's size. If you don't have a *detect magic* spell handy, you could try to put on a ring you've found. If it just happens to fit, it could be a magic ring. (Though a crafty DM might decide that a magic ring won't resize itself unless you know it's magical before you put it on.)

**Rods:** Rods look like short sticks or scepters, and some of them are heavy and sturdy enough to function as clubs or maces.

Many rods are activated by command word, though a few require some specific action, such as pressing a catch in the rod or planting the rod in the ground, and some rods work automatically. Most of the comments on activating rings also apply to rods, but it always pays to check the rod's description for the activation method. Some rods have different activation methods for different functions. For example, you can configure a *rod of lordly might* to serve as various kinds of weapons, and you do so by pressing catches on the rod. Manipulating a catch works just like drawing a weapon (see the first paragraph in the rod's description). That means you can operate a catch as a move action, or as part of a move action if your base attack bonus is at least +1. Presumably, you can operate a catch as free action if you have the Quick Draw feat. A *rod of lordly might* also has spell-like abilities that require a command word (and thus a standard action) to activate, though some of those work by touch, so your standard action to activate the spell-like ability also includes the touch attack.

**Scrolls:** A scroll is essentially a precast spell in written form. Scrolls can be tricky to use because you must first decipher the writing on them and then read the scroll. The whole process is detailed on page 238 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Also see the Spell Completion section in Part Two for notes on activating scrolls.

**Staffs:** A staff holds several different spell effects that you trigger with the spell trigger activation method (see Part Two). A staff has charges, and you expend one or more charges whenever you use the staff.

To activate a staff, you must hold it forth in at least one hand (or whatever passes for a hand) and speak a single word.

A staff is about the size of a quarterstaff made for a Medium creature, and you could assume that a staff can function as a Medium masterwork quarterstaff. In fact, Table 7-32 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* says that the cost to create a staff includes 300 gp for a masterwork quarterstaff (though this is not mentioned in the notes for staff creation on page 287).

Staffs also are unusual because the user's caster level and spell save DC modifiers can be used instead of the staff's (see Part Three).

**Wands:** A wand is a fairly flimsy stick that holds a single spell. Wands have charges; activating a wand releases the spell in it and consumes a charge.

Wands use the spell trigger activation method (see Part Two). To activate a wand, you must hold it one hand (or whatever passes for a hand) and speak a single word.

**Wondrous Items:** This is a catchall category for anything that doesn't fall into the other groups.

Using a wondrous item usually requires you to wear the item (if it's something that's usually worn, such as a cloak, boot, or gauntlet), or held in the hand (if it's something that's usually held, such as a tool or musical instrument). A few wondrous items work whenever you carry the item with you, for example, a *pearl of power*. Bigger items, such as magic mirrors, have to be propped up or attached to a wall. And a couple of wondrous items are just plain weird. For example, you have to toss an *ioun stone* into the air so that it can orbit your head. As always, check the item's description to find out how it's used.

The notes on activating rings generally also apply to wondrous items.

Also like rings, wondrous items that have to be worn adjust their sizes to fit any user.

## What's Next?

That's all we have time for this week. Next week, we'll consider activating magic items.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for 18 years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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